

VZCZCXRO2921
RR RUEHSK
DE RUEHMO #3575/01 3451453
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 101453Z DEC 08
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1076
INFO RUEHSK/AMEMBASSY MINSK
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 003575

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [EFIN](#) [RS](#)

SUBJECT: SMOLENSK: HOPE IN GOD AND PUTIN, APATHY IN ALL ELSE

REF: A. MOSCOW 3506

[1](#)B. MOSCOW 436

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Recent conversations with government, political, business, religious and NGO officials in Smolensk revealed the divisions between official messages of calm and stability and the nervousness and discontent among citizens. Senior United Russia officials, speaking in their capacity as local and regional government officials, argued that Smolensk enjoyed political and economic stability, and that it would manage well through any economic downturn. Privately, though, opposition party, business, NGO and media representatives cited indicators of the already worsening economic situation in the region, and the helplessness of local and regional government leaders in taking any effective action to mitigate consequences for citizens. Mayoral elections in March 2009 may see a new generation take office, but public cynicism about official corruption means little will change. End Summary.

Regional Government: Everything Under Control

[1](#)2. (SBU) Located approximately 350 miles to the west of Moscow, the city of Smolensk and the oblast of the same name have suffered significant declines in population and investment over the past 10 years. Increased revenue from the federal budget has enabled regional and local authorities to maintain and expand support for citizen services, though not for public infrastructure (roads, etc.), which are in poor condition. Both Smolensk Oblast Governor Antufyev and Smolensk city Mayor Haletskiy served as deputies in their respective administrative organizations before taking their seats as executives. They were rewarded for their loyalty to United Russia and (then) President Putin, and for their ability to satisfy local business (and some say, criminal) interests.

[1](#)3. (C) Nonetheless, the Governor's Spokesman, Yuriy Glebov, December 1 painted for us a picture of Smolensk making the most of its location, agricultural resources and the entrepreneurship of citizens. Glebov claimed that there were no concerns that major regional enterprises might have to reduce staff, that businesses or the government would be unable to fulfill payment obligations, or that there would be any slowdown in construction. Indeed, joined by city deputy mayor Raisa Cheberyak, he emphasized rather that the drop in housing prices was enabling even more citizens to own homes. Stable employment conditions encourage young people to remain in the city and region after studies at institutions of higher learning, like Smolensk State University. And financial support from the oblast for parents of more than one child was helping to reverse demographic trends that imperiled the long-term vitality of the region.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Seemingly more out of hope than on the basis of any significant tangible developments, regional political leaders told us that Smolensk's proximity to Belarus, the open border

and tariff-free trade in certain commodities represented valuable commercial potential for the oblast and city. They pointed to joint projects in food production and machine construction as the most promising fields for cooperation. They downplayed political disagreements between Minsk and Moscow, and spoke instead of the people-to-people contact that flourished in spite of the problems. Separately, journalists and business leaders said that economic activity with Belarus amounted to little, and that the economic livelihood of few in the region was connected in any way to Belarus.

Weak Local United Russia Leadership Noticed

15. (SBU) In contrast, leaders of medium-sized businesses, independent analysts and lower-level officials in the regional and local United Russia party apparatus openly pointed to stagnation in local and regional leadership. Communist Party leader Valeriy Kuznetsov proudly cited the fact that among all Russia's regions, support for Medvedev in the March presidential elections was weakest in Smolensk, and strongest for the Communist Party. Smolensk Pravoe Delo chairman Mikhail Khvostantsev, a personal acquaintance of Governor Afuniev since the days when they were both deputy governors, said that the governor's lack of business and leadership skills had translated directly into Smolensk's inability to use its resources to improve infrastructure and attract business. Given the current economic climate, and in spite of intimations of economic impropriety on the part of Afuniev, Khvostantsev said he did not expect Moscow to make any changes in regional leadership.

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16. (SBU) Vyacheslav Osin, Human Rights Ombudsman for Smolensk told us that 90 percent of the appeals to his office and correspondingly, 90 percent of his time, are devoted to financial shortfalls experienced by more vulnerable members of society in Smolensk, especially orphaned children and the elderly. He acknowledged that his attempts to intercede on behalf of citizens facing difficulties, or those unable to secure what they perceived as justice from the court system had been a waste of time. "The court system is the least transparent, the most dependent on politics from above. I gave up trying to fight corrupt justices who receive the verdicts they will hand down by telephone. Instead, I focused on people who I could actually help." That has become more important since early autumn, he said, as unemployment has grown and as state assistance to the needy in the region has been delayed in order to fund other obligations.

17. (SBU) Smolensk will hold mayoral elections in March, 2009. Current Mayor Vladimir Haletskiy faces strong competition from within the local United Russia establishment. Chairman of the Public Chamber Yuriy Rebrik, donning his hat as former member of the national Supreme Council of United Russia, told us that he had given up on Haletskiy for not doing enough to combat organized crime in the city. He argued that Smolensk needed a new, younger generation to take power, citing the election of Barak Obama as a great example for Russian citizens of the importance of participating in the democratic process. That said, all political organizations aside from United Russia cited the personal business connections each of the major United Russia pretenders has with local and regional government. Independent journalist Sergey Kovalev bemoaned the total absence of any trust by citizens in currently elected officials or any of those who might possibly assume office. Smolensk survives not as a result of any decisions taken locally, but because of the largesse that comes from the national budget and Moscow decisions to invest in local industry. Khvostantsev echoed the sentiment, noting that he was placing his hopes in Pravoe Delo godfather Anatoliy Chubais as the one through whom his personal relations who could save Smolensk from continuing to decline.

¶18. (SBU) Director of United Russia's/Premier Putin's Smolensk "reception center" Aleksey Seryy (a USG FLEX program alumnus) told us that he faces a difficult task of attempting to satisfy local residents who have placed all their hopes in the ability of Putin to solve their (local) problems. He said he is becoming increasingly frustrated with the refusal to bring clearly local problems, including the shortage of daycare and kindergarten facilities, to the attention of local authorities. Instead, he is asked to convey even demands of a local nature to Moscow for Putin to resolve. (Note: Putin himself made the same comment during q's and a's with reporters after his December 4 call-in program on live national television. End Note.)

¶19. (SBU) Indeed, the centerpiece of the region's economic well-being is the Krystal diamond fabrication plant. Although government officials said the facility is functioning at standard capacity, local business leaders, and United Russia officials (who are beginning to receive complaints from employees) reported that the plant is working only 3-4 days per week, and that the company has also failed to pay employees' salaries on time. Khvostantsev told us that failure to make any major investment in new technology for the facility, which should have occurred when times were better, is a death sentence. It will continue to loss relevance -- and customers.

¶10. (SBU) Critical for citizens in the region is the appearance of national political stability. Kovalev, Khvostantsev and United Russia's Seryy told us that citizens do not differentiate between Medvedev and Putin. As long as Putin remains in a significant position in national leadership and has taken responsibility for seeing Russia through its current economic difficulties, it does not matter who else is at the helm with him. Communist Party chief Kuznetsov said he had given up discussing the envisioned extension of presidential terms because it was simply not seen as relevant by local citizens to their daily lives. Moreover, many supported it as either necessary to ensure political stability - either with Medvedev at the helm from 2012-2018, or with Putin again as president.

Aide to Metropolitan Kirill Describes Agenda

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¶11. (SBU) The Russian Orthodox Church plays a key role in the life of the city, in large part due to the fact that it is the seat of Metropolitan Kirill, now Interm ROC Head following the death of Patriarch Aleksey II. Kirill's aide Bishop Ignatiy told us over lunch that Smolensk has greatly benefited from the presence of Kirill in the city. He has been able to use his influence and stature with local and regional officials to bring national and international attention to the city, and to weigh in on behalf of policies (religious education in schools, financial support for young families and restrictions on the availability of abortions) consistent with ROC positions. Svetlana Yegorova, Chairwoman of the Center for Women's Support NGO, said she takes into account ROC views when she works with local officials on women's issues, noting in particular the authority Kirill wields in the community.

Comment: All Politics is Local, But Help is National

¶12. (SBU) Stagnation in Smolensk is not just a matter of lackluster local leadership, but a symptom of the vertical of power and economic dependency which affects many regions. As eyes increasingly turn to Moscow, and specifically to Putin, for guidance through tough times, all politics may indeed be

local (for better or worse), but the only help that matters
or that people trust is that which comes from the national
level.

RUBIN